DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 203 CS 210 422

AUTHOR Roth, Robert G.
TITLE Addressing Unknown Readers: The Expanded Other Meets the Self.
PUB DATE 19 Mar 87
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Analysis; *Audiences; Higher Education; *Reader Text Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness

ABSTRACT

In order for students to write for a general audience, they must be able to address unknown readers. Research into how successful writers perceive their audience suggests that they write to an audience who is an idealized version of themselves. Writing for an unknown audience can be a writer's search for common ground, for a set of beliefs and assumptions writers may share with their readers. Writing well for others depends upon writing for oneself in three ways: (1) when writers try to figure out what they believe and why they believe it, they gradually discover what they have to say to others; (2) by reading their emerging texts for themselves, writers discover further things to say to others; and (3) when revising a completed portion of text, writers test the likely effects of their words on other readers by becoming their own readers. Once this interdependence between writer and audience is understood, writers are in a better position to appreciate the role of audience during revising. Students should be encouraged to let their audience representations evolve and to discover how writing to validate their ideas in others' eyes helps to clarify their ideas to themselves. (Eighteen references are included.) (SRT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert G. Roth

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Robert G. Roth, Ed.D.
Middlesex County College
Edison, New Jersey 08818-3050

ED281203

Addressing Unknown Readers: The Expanded Other Meets the Self

(A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, March 19, 1987, Atlanta, Georgia)

When we consider recent scholarship on audience, we discover competing emphases. Linda Flower and Carol Berkenkotter, for example, have emphasized that, during composing, writers will often conjure up images of actual and potential readers, using such audience representations both to gain a clearer sense of their purposes in writing and to gauge the effects of various composing decisions. Flower has even suggested that such audience awareness distinguishes an entity called "reader-based prose" from one she calls "writer-based prose." On the other hand, Douglas Park has shown us that much written discourse has no particular audience other than that defined by the social relationship established by the text itself. And George Dillon asserts that essayists write "for 'the unknown reader.'" "The expository essay," Dillon explains, "is unsituated to an extreme degree: the reader and writer do not know each other, communicate only via the written page, and do not belong to any special group." To write an expository essay, then, a writer must be able to address a "general audience," one that is presumably too large and indefinite to be readily defined or analyzed.

Finally, there are those who would remind us that we often write as much for ourselves as for others. Nearly twenty years ago, Janet Emig described the "reflexive mode" as one in which "the chief audience is the writer himself," perhaps influenced by social psychologist George Herbert Mead, who insisted that "reflexiveness--the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself . . . is the essential condition for the development of mind." The "reflexivists" would argue that one can be one's

CS210422

own audience--not only when keeping journals and pouring out exploratory drafts, but at times even when preparing more finished pieces--for which they may later seek out (or even hope to create) a readership. Most recently, Peter Elbow has even constructed a thorough "Argument for Ignoring Audience," explaining why "writer-based prose is sometimes better than reader-based prose." Perhaps Linda Flower's dichotomy has been too rigidly drawn.

If we want students to learn to write for a general audience, they must be able to address unknown readers, many different people they have never met and may know relatively little about. To do so successfully, I believe, they will need to learn when to consider audience and when to ignore it--and how to shuttle back and forth between these two ways of working. The secret to helping students develop the ability to address unknown readers is to understand the interconnectedness of writing for others and writing for oneself. As Elaine Maimon put it while speaking at Rutgers last week, there is an essential "interrelationship between self-exploration and public statement." This is true in an even more immediate sense than many of us may have envisioned, for, as I hope to show, unless writers have learned how to interweave the public and the private, they will not be able to write well for a general audience.

There is good reason to challenge our students to take on the rigors of addressing broad audiences, to experience the difficulties of thinking through a subject deeply enough to be able to appeal to a diverse and partly unknown audience. Yet how do we help them do so? While they may want to imagine what various members of their public audience might be like, the traditional advice to define, analyze, and accommodate one's audience will be of limited help here. The audience for such writing is too diverse, exists as much within the writer as outside, and must to some degree be

created out of that writer's half-formed intentions rather than simply identified and then accommodated. Yet it is certainly no more helpful simply to tell students to go ahead and "write for readers in general." As Peter Elbow points out, "When students are asked to write to readers they have not met or cannot imagine, such as 'the general reader' or 'the educated public,' they often find nothing to say except cliches they know they don't even quite believe."

What can we do to help then? My research into the ways successful student writers think about their readers suggests that the first step is to free ourselves from an inappropriately narrow audience paradigm. That paradigm, relevant only to relatively restricted writing situations, such as the preparation of institutional memos and reports, conceives of the writer's audience as a predefined set of readers that is essentially uniform and unchanging. It also emphasizes the differences between a writer's knowledge and beliefs and those of readers. Yet my work with successful student writers composing essays over time to be published to their college community reveals a more flexible working concept of audience. These writers did not maintain uniform audience representations; rather, they tended to consider many different potential readers at different times. They considered fellow students and teachers, liberals and conservatives, sympathetic readers and hostile ones. One of them even considered not only the immediate campus audience but the extended, potential audience she might reach if her essay were eventually published as an article beyond the campus.

Nor did these proficient student writers maintain a static sense of audience. Instead, they revised dramatically their sense of who they were addressing, allowing their final audience definitions to gradually evolve as they planned, wrote, and rewrote their essays. One student, for example,

started out seeing most of her readers as apathetic and resistant, yet she ended by prominantly including much more sympathetic and congenial readers. Though we usually speak of audience as if it were preset and unmalleable, these successful student writers tended to treat audience as subject to revision, to let it, like focus and purpose, develop and evolve during composing. (For a more detailed discussion, see my "The Evolving Audience.")

The third factor in the narrow audience paradigm emphasizes differences between writers and their readers. Much classroom talk about audience understandably reflects a concern that student writers may forget that many of their readers will not necessarily share their own perspectives and assumptions. But the student writers I worked with did not in practice always maintain a sharp division between themselves and their readers. Of course, they did not assume that their readers would know beforehand what they had in mind or that these readers would spontaneously share their own assumptions or attitudes. In fact, they worked very hard to ensure that their lines of thought were clear, their arguments and examples convincing, and their images and details vivid and evocative. Yet this had little to do with their sense of who in particular their audiences were.

In fact, these writers often took over the roles ordinarily associated with their audiences. One student expressed no consciousness of any audience other than himself. "I don't know who my reader is," he explained when finally asked directly. "Myself, I guess. I'm writing it hoping it will get me to do something." And later he said he had realized that "I let the audience come to me." Another described herself early on as "following out the thread of my own thought" and later as writing "to find out what I believe and why I believe it" and as "trying to find out about things that I take for granted." Still later she explained that "I'm not doing this for

the reader's edification; I'm doing it more for my own." At the end of the process she declared that all her detailed concerns about the reader that we had uncovered were really her own concerns: "These are almost me," she said. "I'm taking me and dividing me up into reader, you know, concerns of mine."

And during composing two of the students each gradually came to address an ideal reader who was clearly a self projection: they saw themselves as trying to appeal to hoped-for readers who, I came to realize, were actually idealized versions of themselves. In working on their essays, then, these students were not always making a sharp demarcation between themselves and the public audience they hoped to reach. In fact, writing for unknown readers may be seen as the writer's search for common ground, for a set of beliefs and assumptions writers may share with their readers.

When we reread a draft of an essay, we sometimes imagine how it might read to a friend or colleague, a sympathetic or critical reader. At other times, though, we just read it as ourselves trying to gauge the overall impression it makes on us. We try to read it as if we were coming upon it fresh, but we are not necessarily role-playing any particular external reader. In fact, there is an essential interdependence between reading as the other and reading as oneself, one mode inevitably slipping unnoticed into the other. For example, I think about the fact that what I am saying will sound pretty odd and unconvincing to some of my readers. This makes me wonder how I can get such readers to even consider my perspective, and this in turn leads me to reconsider more carefully just why I hold this perspective. And I'm off, developing more precisely just why I view the issue as I do. Thus, by considering the potential objections of others to what we are trying to say, we begin to see the ramifications of our own ideas: we develop our own views by considering the likely responses and concerns of others. This, I take it, is what Michael Polanyi means when in

Personal Knowledge he claims that the writing of that entire complex study is "a systematic course in teaching myself to hold my own beliefs." In this sense, writing well for oneself depends upon writing for others.

But the opposite is also true. In at least three ways, writing well for others depends upon writing for oneself. First of all, by trying to figure out what we believe and why we believe it, we gradually discover what we have to say to others. As Richard Hoggart has said, "We best speak to others when we forget them and concentrate on trying to be straight towards our own experience, in the hope that honestly seen experience becomes exchangeable." Second, by reading their emerging texts for themselves, writers discover further things to say to others. As Mead puts it, "We are continually following up our own address to other persons by an understanding of what we are saying, and using that understanding in the direction of our continued speech." And third, when revising a completed portion of text, we test the likely effects of our words on another reader by becoming our own readers. As Mead says, the writer "can only test his results in himself by seeing whether these words do call out in him the response he wants to call out in others." One often writes for oneself in order to communicate to others, then, just as by addressing others one may speak powerfully to oneself.

Once we understand this interdependence, we are in a better position to appreciate the role of audience during revising. All too often students are misled into thinking that the purpose of keeping intended readers in mind when rereading drafts in progress is solely to ensure that what they have written is not likely to offend or disappoint these readers. One very fine textbook, for example, explains that "writers must repeatedly measure the looks, the sounds, the flow, the sense, the structure of their evolving draft against the tastes and expectations of their intended readers." I

agree that writers must consider the "tastes and expectations" of intended readers. However, much more than this is at stake here. Writers do use their sense of audience functionally to help them maintain what John Ciardi has called "an outside eye," to help them get a good, clear reading. Yet what they are checking for is not so much whether the text is well adapted to the tastes and expectations of intended readers as whether it is, as Gabriel Della-Piana says, "congruent with [their] image of what the piece of writing is intended to accomplish." The goal during revision is a better and better fit between the text and the writer's unfolding intentions. If writers never read their drafts with other readers in mind, they may never get a clear measure of what is there and what is not yet there. However, if writers let concerns over the tastes and expectations of intended readers dominate, they may lose track of the main purpose in reading it in the first place. Surely too restricted a sense of readers' expectations is particularly inappropriate when a writer addresses a broad public audience.

The sort of "breadth" we are looking for when we write for a general audience is achieved not through divorcing ourselves, our own personal histories and concerns, from those of the others we would hope to address, but through building on these very concerns, through multiplying and expanding these until we have found a viable basis for claiming the interest of unknown readers. Nicholas Coles and Susan Wall have recently made a parallel point about the <u>reader</u> responses of adult basic writers. They write:

> We see the move to make multiple identifications and diferentiations as an important step for our students if they are to connect their particular histories with the larger context of 'work' in our society. Academic reading requires this identification across differences. We would note, however, that this is not the same ability as that implied by the metaphor of 'decentering.' For the strategies that allow our students to locate themselves in larger categories and to see their lives from other points of view are not served well by terms that

implicitly divorce readers from their feelings of identity with others.

This applies equally to these same students as writers if they are to develop their ability to address wider and wider audiences. They do so in part through "multiple identifications and differentiations." That is, they identify with potential readers in various ways by differentiating their potential audiences (and themselves) into a multiplicity of audiences (and selves). And they do so, not by "decentering," by leaving the self behind, but through a gradually expanding identification with others as both the self and others become redefined in a process in which the writer discovers the common ground he or she may share with previously unknown readers.

I am suggesting, then, that the first step in helping students learn to write for a broad, public audience requires that we see that the writer's audience is often a diverse group of dissimilar readers; that it is subject to revision throughout composing; and that it need not be completely divorced from the writer's self. While we want students to think in terms of actual people reading their words, we do not want to force them to come up with either narrow or inflexible audience representations. Writers certainly do often get themselves started by thinking about the people with whom they are trying to communicate. In fact, when we write it helps to feel that there will be an interested audience waiting out there for us. Thinking about different possible readers, too, is one of the most powerful tools writers use to generate content, strategies, and approaches. But this ploy actually becomes more effective if many different possible readers are considered.

We want to encourage student writers to let their audience representations evolve. And we can encourage such flexible audience representations largely by helping students discover how writing to validate their ideas in others' eyes helps them to clarify their ideas to

themselves--and vice versa. The power of language lies in the fact that it is both highly conventional and highly individual, both public and private at once. One of the major appeals of writing is its potential to help us discover and clarify our own beliefs and, at the same time, see that these developing beliefs can become the basis for sharing our experiences with unknown others.

REFERENCES

Berkenkotter, Carol. "Understanding a Writer's Awareness of Audience." College Composition & Communication 32 (1981): 388-99.

Coles, Nicholas, and Susan V. Wall. "Conflict and Power in the Reader-Responses of Adult Basic Writers." College Composition & Communication 49 (1987): 298-314.

Daiker, Donald A., Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg. The Writer's Options: Combining to Composing, 3rd ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

Della-Piana, Gabriel. "Research Strategies for the Study of Revision Processes in Writing Poetry." In Cooper & Odell, eds. Research on Composing: Points of Departure. Urbana: NCTE, 1978.

Dillon, George L. Constructing Texts: Elements of a Theory of Composition and Style. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981.

Elbow, Peter. "Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." College English 49 (1987): 50-69.

Emig, Janet. The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (NCTE Research Report No. 13). Urbana: NCTE, 1971.

Flower, Linda: "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." College English 41 (1979): 19-37.

Flower, Linda, and John Hayes. "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem." College Composition & Communication 31 (1980): 21-32.

Hoggart, Richard. The Uses of Literacy. London: Chatto and Windus, 1957.

Maimon, Elaine P. "Writing Across the Disciplines." Talk Delivered at Rutgers University, March 9, 1987.

Mead, George H. Mind, Self & Society. 1934. Ed. & introd. Charles W. Morris. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962.

Park, Douglas B. "Analyzing Audiences." College Composition & Communication 37 (1986): 478-488.

Park, Douglas B. "The Meanings of 'Audience.'" College English 44 (1982): 247-57.

Park, Douglas B. "What is a General Audience?" Unpublished Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition & Communication in Atlanta, March 19, 1987.

Polanyi, Michael. Personal Knowledge. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958.

Roth, Robert G. "The Evolving Audience: Alternatives to Audience Accommodation." College Composition & Communication 38 (1987): 47-55.

Roth, Robert G. The Evolving Audience: Alternatives to Audience Accommodation in the Composing Processes of Skilled College Writers. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertion. Rutgers University, 1986.